

SATIRICAL ASPECTS OF MARCEL PROUST'S
REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

L'homme mord avec le rire.

—Baudelaire

IN A general way, one may qualify Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* as a social comedy; and it is in Combray, in reality the village of Illiers, a few miles from Paris, that Proust discloses for us, in the earliest pages of his novel, the dual source of his satire: the "côté" Swann and the "côté" Guermantes, symbolized geographically by Méséglise and the Vivonne River. "For Proust," writes Jose Ortega y Gasset, "the veritable agents of vital variations are, rather than characters, winds, the physical and moral climates which surround them successively. And the biography of each one is dominated by certain spiritual breezes which blow alternatively and polarize their sensibility. Everything depends on the side from which the wind sends its breath; and just as there are north winds and south winds, thus the characters of Proust vary according to whether the breath of existence comes from Méséglise or the Vivonne."¹

But if the winds of the Proustian satire originate in Combray, it is toward Paris that they blow. *Remembrance of Things Past* is properly a Parisian novel. Balbec—the seaside resort on the coast of Brittany where Proust goes with his beloved grandmother, and where he meets the "flowering young girls"—remains after all merely an extension of the capital, its summer aspect, and La Raspelière, where the Verdurins hold their little court is a tiny fragment of Paris transported to the countryside. And what of Paris itself? All we know of it from Proust is enclosed in an elegant and expensive rectangle of shops, thoroughfares, mansions and

apartment houses bounded by the Trocadéro, the Wood of Boulogne, the Avenue des Champs Elysées and the right bank of the Seine. Inevitably, therefore, and at first glance, Proust's world is as restricted horizontally as it is vertically. The Paris of Balzac, which stretches before us in a vast panorama, with every element of its population accounted for, is a far cry indeed from the Paris of Proust.

Yet Proust himself was not unaware of the limitations involved in this exploration in depth of the city he knew and loved. "Every social condition is interesting in itself," he tells us, "and it can be as curious for an artist to show the ways of a queen as the habits of a dressmaker."² And it would be well, indeed, to bear in mind this aspect, which I believe fundamental, of *Remembrance of Things Past*. As modern as Proust seems, as far as his art may be situated in literary history from that of Racine, it is nevertheless true that both masters have sought to fathom, in the narrow aristocratic worlds which occupied them, the depths of the human heart. The genius of a Balzac is the product of a century devoted with increasing ardor to science: it was to find its religion in the calm and self-assured optimism of Auguste Comte. Proust, however, for all his admiration for Balzac, which was not negligible, was a curious amalgam of two centuries which are not, perhaps, as far apart as we may imagine: a century of great moralists, and a century which has, in France anyway, witnessed a notable reaction against the tide of positivism: the spiritualism of Bergson, the fresh, strong Catholicism of Bloy, Claudel, Maritain, Blondel, the subjectivism of the existentialists. And although by the very nature of our study, we will try to limit ourselves to a consideration of Proust's world, it may be well to keep in mind that his ultimate resolve was not to rewrite the Human Comedy, but to "translate"—the word is Proust's own—people and events in terms of his consciousness.

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There is an irony about Proust's novel which in a sense prefigures the satire, and is so transparent that it is not ordinarily mentioned: *Remembrance of Things Past* is perhaps first of all a novel about parties, about the people who give them and the people who go to them—yet it is perhaps the saddest novel of our time. Its characters have most of the attributes of wealth, talent, intelligence and social position, and yet in obscure ways pass their lives suffering. Within those marvelous and illuminated enclosures which Proust often compares to aquariums—the dining rooms and salons of the private hotels of the Faubourg Saint-Germain—they gather in groups, engage in conversations which are by turns witty, insipid, or “genteel” (and which Proust pitilessly records over hundreds of pages) as they listen to a sonata or watch, with a magnificent kind of boredom, a display of fireworks in an English garden. At times they seem to be engaged in the defense and illustration of some inscrutable etiquette, precariously balancing their velleities against their inhibitions, their private impulses against their public honor, expending their feeble energies in the pursuit of a cup of tea, in controlled grimaces, in automatic handshakes, in complex peregrinations around a drawing room floor. And we discover that it is the rites of pleasure which Proust offers us, not its substance; that it is the mechanics of gaiety which he renders, not its secret: “As soon as the order to serve was given, in a vast, giratory, multiple, and simultaneous operation, the double doors of the dining room were opened wide. . . .”⁸

But if the search for pleasure characterizes these elegant and subtly conceived automata, death, which haunted Proust as it had Montaigne, attends all their functions, uninvited, but terribly present, like a poor relation. This juxtaposition of death which awaits us, and of distraction, which aims to help us forget that death is there, marks what

we may call the extreme limits of the Proustian satire, where comedy and tragedy wear identical expressions. "Our love of life," says Proust, "is an old love affair that we can't get rid of. Its strength lies in its permanence. But death which ends it will cure us of our desire for immortality."⁴

It is not, therefore, as a physical, or even as a psychological reality, that death interests Proust, but as something scarcely perceptible which flutters on the fringe of events, or spoils the monotonous music of Parisian mundanity like a discord, a false note. Consider, for example, the scene before the Hôtel de Guermantes, where Swann informs the Duchess of the gravity of his illness:

"But my dear . . . according to the doctors I've consulted, at the end of the year, the ailment I have, and which may carry me off at any moment, won't leave me in any case more than three or four months to live, and even that is the absolute maximum," answered Swann smiling, while the footman opened the glass door of the vestibule, to let the duchess pass.

"What is that you are saying?" cried the Duchess, stopping a second in her walk toward the carriage and looking up with eyes that were blue and melancholy, but full of uncertainty. Placed for the first time of her life between two obligations as different as getting into a carriage to dine in town and showing pity for a man who is going to die, she saw nothing in her code of etiquette to indicate the course to follow, and, not knowing which she should prefer, she believed she ought to pretend not to believe that the second alternative was to be considered, so as to obey the first, which required less effort at the moment, and thought that the best way to resolve the conflict was to deny it. "You're joking," she said to Swann.

"It would be a joke of charming taste," Swann answered ironically. . . . "But above all I don't want to make you late, you are dining in town," he added, because he knew that for others, their own obligations surpass the death of a friend and because he put himself in their place, thanks to his politeness. But that of the Duchess also permitted her to perceive confusedly that the dinner to which she was going must count less for Swann than his own death. Thus, still walking toward the carriage, she hunched

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her shoulders saying, "Don't you bother about that dinner. It has no importance!" But these words put the Duke in a bad humor: "Come on, Oriane, don't stand there chatting like that . . . with Swann, you know very well that Mme de Sainte-Euverte insists that we be at table at 8 o'clock sharp. . . . Oriane, what have you done, poor thing! You've kept your black shoes. With a red gown! Go up at once and put on her red shoes, or rather," he turned to the footman, "tell the Duchess' chambermaid to bring down some red shoes right away."⁵

It is worth remarking that this scene, in which frivolity—symbolized by a pair of red shoes—vanquishes the image of death, is repeated in various forms throughout *Remembrance of Things Past*: when Professor E, for example, a few moments after having revealed to the narrator the fatal nature of his grandmother's illness, loses his temper because his maid having forgotten to pierce his boutonniere, he risks being late for a dinner party; when Doctor Cottard, about to leave for a reception, refuses to treat the bleeding vein of his housekeeper ("But I can't, Leontine," he shouts to his wife. "Can't you see that I'm wearing my white vest?"⁶); or when M. Verdurin affects to understand the news of the death of his friend Princess Sherbatoff, which the unhappy Saniette tries to convey just before a party ("You, you're always exaggerating," he said brutally to Saniette . . . for, the party not having been cancelled, he preferred the hypothesis of illness"⁷). Indeed, an early version of these scenes may be found in Proust's *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, when Baldassare Silvande begs his mistress Pia on his deathbed not to leave him to go to a ball, and she replies, "I would remain inconsolable for eternity if I did not go to that ball!"⁸

Most of all, I think, the examples I have cited tend to prove how false is the accusation of amorality so often leveled at Proust. For each of these scenes has something of the universality of a parable, and something, surely, of its

moral purpose, whose gist might be culled directly from Pascal: "Whatever condition one may imagine, if one assembles all the goods which may belong to us, royalty is the most beautiful post in the world, and yet . . . if it be without distraction, and it considers itself and reflects upon what it is, this languishing facility will not sustain it, it will fall by necessity into views which menace it of revolts which may occur, and finally of death and of ailments which are inevitable; so that, if it is without what one calls distraction, see how wretched it is, and more wretched than the least of its subjects, who plays and distracts himself."⁹

But let us not be misled. Although the Proustian character seems to be essentially frivolous, he cannot be called precisely indolent, for he employs almost as much energy in the methodical pursuit of pleasure as Balzac's characters in striving for success. But since this energy is characterized by a congenital refusal to confront the fundamental realities of what Montaigne called the human condition, it resembles nothing so much as an inverted kind of abulia, and the creations of Proust seem to move through their lives with some of the shiftless langour of the fishes to which, as we have seen, they are so often compared: "Swann . . . had an air of not daring to have an opinion and of being tranquil only when he could give meticulously precise information."¹⁰ As with all of Proust's characters, Swann's sufferings stem from his inability to find a frame of reference even for the smallest events of his life. He is neither more nor less than the constant embodiment of his predicament, like a man trying to balance himself on top of a wheel, with nothing before or behind. His unhappiness, therefore, has the urgency, and indeed the absurdity, of a danger with no perceivable cause, and this is why he seems unaware that he is in love with Odette when he desires her most, and why,

even in the throes of jealousy, he will not admit that he is jealous. "He could not reflect upon that idea, for an access of mental indolence, which was congenital, intermittent, and providential, with him, happened at that moment to extinguish all light in his intelligence, as suddenly as later, when electric lights were everywhere installed, one could cut off electricity in a house."¹¹

But *Remembrance of Things Past*, more perhaps than a novel about individuals, is a novel about a class—or rather, two classes, which we found symbolized in Combray: the aristocracy, and that level of the bourgeoisie which comes closest to emulating it. *Remembrance of Things Past* is also a novel about a time, which extends roughly between 1870 and 1916, and while I shall not commit the error of calling it an historical novel, does not Proust, a little bit like his Doctor Dieulafoy, whose specialty is to diagnose that a patient has died, analyze that last, golden flurry, rather mournfully protracted, of a class which history had already condemned? For the ultimate triumph of the bourgeoisie—or, if you like, the conquest of the Guermantes by the Verdurins—marks the final and irrevocable extinction of the French aristocracy. This social tragedy—if one may call it that—had as its immediate cause the only properly political event with which Proust was concerned, but seen, as it were, from a psychological rather than a political point of view. The Dreyfus Affair is never approached by Proust as if it were a body of water whose contours were unmistakable and whose composition were a matter of chemistry. For the characters of *Remembrance of Things Past* this immense social and political upheaval seemed as intimate as gossip, and as subjective as anxiety. It penetrated their closed and jaded little universe like a chilly but not exceedingly uncomfortable little draught, whose source is inexplicable, and

whose effects are scarcely more felt or feared by the victims who are ultimately going to die from them, than a cold. It would not be amiss here to speak, as does Cecile Delherbe, of Proust's "relativism of history,"¹² and surely this silent and subtle revolution, whose guillotine was invisible (being moral), and whose Terror was so attenuated and even, one might add, so unconscious, that few contemporaries could guess its true proportions, required the talents of a Proust to be rendered in all its mysterious complexity. For Proust the Dreyfus Affair was not merely a cape-and-dagger adventure with a political climax, but a form of personal irritation, an excuse for impulses of social partiality and egotism, a vague emotional disturbance, and a subject of conversation: "In any case," says the Duchess of Guermantes, "if this Dreyfus is innocent, he scarcely proves it. What idiotic, pompous letters he writes from his island. I don't know if M. Esterhazy is worth more than he, but he has a different kind of chic in his phrasing, another color. That ought not to make the partisans of M. Dreyfus very happy. What a pity for them that they can't change the victim!"¹³ And the Duke, furious because of the dreyfusism of his old friend Swann (and forgetting that Swann is a Jew): "He carries ingratitude to the point of being a defender of Dreyfus!"¹⁴ For opposite reasons, Mme. Sazaret scorns the narrator's parents, and Proust comments that "one pardons individual crimes, but not one's participation in a collective crime."¹⁵ Gradually the various salons of Paris take sides, but motives remain confused and complex, too often further distorted by hidden rancors, with nuances of jealousy, prejudice, obscure panic, and snobbishness. The salon of Mme. Verdurin becomes a circle for defenders of Dreyfus, but one suspects that her ardent republicanism masks an ancient fury against the more exclusive salons,

largely opposed to Dreyfus. Innumerable frictions brings about the complete collapse of the aristocratic class. We learn of Swann's ostracism from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, of the marriage of his daughter, Gilberte, with Saint-Loup, nephew of the Duchess of Guermantes, and the marriage, too, brilliantly manoeuvred by Charlus, of a vest-maker's daughter with an aristocrat, and upon whose death all the princely families of Europe go into mourning. And our last glimpse of the proud Baron de Charlus himself is that of an old, half-mad paralytic. On the same day the narrator witnesses, at a reception offered by the Princess de Guermantes, a strange spectacle: that social-climbing bourgeoisie, Mme. Verdurin, has become through marriage the new Princess; a former prostitute and a former demi-mondaine are now intimate friends of the Duchess; and it is the Duchess of Guermantes herself who, unconsciously perhaps, pronounces the final demise of her class. Remark- ing a former habitué of her salon, the Count de Bréauté, she says, "That fellow, yes, he knew all that, but all that is finished, they are people whose name no longer exists, and who in any case don't deserve to survive."

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I believe, however, that we should misprize Proust's intentions were we to regard the Dreyfus Affair as the *vera causa* of the disintegration of the aristocratic class in France. The real villain, we have seen, was frivolity: a wilful ignorance of vital realities. Its force was essentially centrifugal. Our second leitmotif, snobbery—or, if I may be permitted to use its French cognate, which seems to apply more exactly here: snobbism—on the contrary tends to consolidate and to conserve. Its power is centripetal, and it may be defined as the gesture which one member of a group makes in order to

repel a member of another group. Its function is to protect the homogeneity of the class, and its ultimate purpose is to generate and foster the myth of exclusiveness. This is why snobbism is opposed to logic. It is founded on a fundamental prejudice which is cultivated, not by reason, but by faith; its slogan is: "You don't belong." From this point of view, Mme. Verdurin's soul-consuming hatred of the Tremoilles, the Sainte-Euvertes, the Guermantes, by whom she is not invited, is understandable, if not sympathetic. She is after all on the side of reason. But equally understandable, and perhaps more sympathetic, is the pathology—for it is that—of the snob. His reflex is after all a peculiarly ineffectual form of self-defense.

That Proust was concerned with the phenomenon of snobbism is evident even to the most cursory reader. In this respect, *Remembrance of Things Past* may be regarded as a remarkably thorough manual of social discrimination. Yet Proust's attitude toward snobbism is not exactly simple. His earliest work, for example, which he published in 1896 at his own expense and called *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, abounds in the most flagrant evidence that its author was at that time as unmitigated a snob as any of his characters—not in the positive sense of the word, but in the negative one, best exemplified in *Remembrance of Things Past* by Le-grandin or Mme. de Cambremer, whom we would call today social climbers. And surely these sketches, poems, short stories and aphorisms, for the most part concerned with contemporary society, are largely spoiled by an accent of respect, almost of idolatry, and a quality of "gentility" which seemed to many of young Marcel's friends his chief recommendation. He takes pleasure, writes Anatole France, in a faintly ironical preface, "in describing the agitated vanities of the snob's soul. He excels in relating elegant griefs, arti-

ficial sufferings, there is in him a depraved Bernardin de Saint Pierre and a naive Petronius."¹⁷ But as in his more frankly journalistic articles, which bear titles like "The Salon of Mme. Madeleine Lemaire," "The Salon of Princess Mathilde," "The Salon of the Countess of Haussonville,"¹⁸ the satirical intent is blunted by an irresistible desire to please.

And indeed at this period Proust was as much a victim of what he later called "the poetry of snobbism" as any of his characters. He frequented assiduously some of the most brilliant salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and bombarded their hostesses with bouquets and euphuistic compliments. He became what the French call a *salonnard*, and his dark, slender form was a familiar one, not only in the drawing rooms already mentioned, but in those of Mme. Bizet-Strauss, who probably enrolled Proust in the cause of Dreyfus, of Mme. de Caillavet, through whom he knew Anatole France, and of Laure Heyman, whose resemblance to Odette de Crécy of the novel has often been remarked. His masculine friends bore the names of Fénelon, Guiche, Bibesco. And while I am far from contending that Proust's admiration for these people was absolutely unqualified—since I believe that most of us, and particularly a Proust, reserve, as it were, between mental parentheses a number of excellent reasons for disliking the people we like most, in the event that we should one day be obliged to cease to like them—it is more than possible that this idolatry satisfied some of the *romanesque* for which youth is said to clamor, and that Proust courted society somewhat as Emma Bovary read love stories and Zola wrote poetry. And he may have been a little intoxicated by his own success, which was fairly brilliant, and which he owed to his charm, to a pair of admirable eyes, which one woman described as "Per-

sian," to his extreme politeness—which according to Robert Dreyfus bordered on the ridiculous, for he was kissing hands at the age of twelve¹⁹—to his wit, and to his capacity for rapt attention.

Between 1896 and 1913, therefore—and probably closer to the latter date—it would not be excessive to suppose that Proust underwent a veritable conversion, and I believe that *Remembrance of Things Past* contains the key to this enigma. It is found in the very spiritual progression which gives to the novel the tension and density which a work so vast might otherwise lack, a progression which leads the narrator through all the stages of disillusionment, from the reveries of childhood to the dolorous awareness of reality which Proust believed alone makes possible the artist; from what he has called "the Name" to "the Thing" behind the name. If *Remembrance of Things Past* opens (as it does indeed) with a fairy tale and closes (practically speaking) with a clinical illustration of human decrepitude, it is because maturity for Proust consisted less in the acquisition of wisdom than in the loss of one's capacity for illusion: it signified the bankruptcy of hope, the conversion of great expectations into petty disappointments. What is more, even after 1913, when what constituted the first volume of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* was published by Bernard Grasset, this souring of Proust's temperament, this spleen which flowed ever more freely within him, did not cease to have an effect upon his work. Thanks to Albert Feuillerat's excellent study, *How Marcel Proust Composed His Novel*, it is possible to appraise the influence of this growing misanthropy from *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en fleurs* to *Le Temps retrouvé*. Comparing the proofs of the original volume (whose publication was interrupted by the war, and resumed by Gailimard in 1919) with the version which be-

came, roughly, *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en fleurs* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*, M. Feuillerat emphasizes that all the additions—which were numerous—tended to make the characters less sympathetic. “To the simply malicious and humoristic observation which brightened the first version,” writes M. Feuillerat, “there has succeeded the harsh, bitter, almost malicious severity with which the author looks at his old friends and pitilessly reveals their pettiness, their stupidity, their faults, their vices.”²⁰ I shall not attempt here to assay the causes which saved Proust from the obscurity of a social-climbing dilettante, and endowed him with the terrible clairvoyance of a Swift or a Molière, but any such study must surely have to take into account the ravages of asthma, the loss of a beloved mother, an extremely sensitive nature—he was hurt easily and cried often—and perhaps most of all the solitude, the fear of discovery, and the sense of guilt, of the congenital homosexual.

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There exists, in the tiny park which extends from the Avenue des Champs Elysées to the Avenue Gabriel and from the Rond-Point to the Place de la Concorde, a small vine-covered pavilion which once housed a rest room, familiar to the young Marcel Proust—or rather to the narrator—for he often played in the park. It was kept by an old lady who, according to the family servant, Françoise, was of good family but had suffered reverses. It was even possible that she was a “marquise.” She often chatted at the entrance to that public lavatory with a park attendant, one of her friends, and one day, while waiting for his grandmother, the narrator could hear the following conversation:

“Well,” said the attendant, “you’re still here. You’re not thinking of retiring?”

“And why should I retire, monsieur? Can you tell me

where I would be better off than here, where I have my little comforts? And then, plenty of goings-on, of distraction, what I call my little Paris. My customers give me all the news. For example, there was one just came out not even five minutes ago, a judge, high-placed he is. Well, sir, for eight years, would you believe it, every day that God made, at three o'clock sharp, he's here, always polite, never a word louder than another, never so much as soils a thing, he stays more than half an hour to read his newspapers and take care of his little needs. Just one single day he didn't come. I didn't notice it right away, but that night suddenly I said to myself, 'My, that gentleman didn't come, maybe he died.' And it upset me, because I get attached to my nice people. So I was real happy when I saw him the next day, I said to him, 'Monsieur, nothing wrong happened yesterday?' Then he said to me like this, that nothing wrong happened to him, that it was his wife who was dead, and that he was so out of sorts he had not been able to come. He sure looked sad, but contented all the same to be back. You could feel that he was glad to have his little habits again. I tried to cheer him up, I said to him, 'You mustn't let yourself go. Come like before, it will be a little distraction from your sorrow.'

"And then," the old lady went on (still addressing the park attendant), "I choose my clients, I don't receive everybody in what I call my salons. Don't it look like a salon, with my flowers? My clients are so nice, some bring me a little branch of lilacs, or jasmine, or roses, my favorite flower."

The idea that we were perhaps badly judged by that lady in bringing her neither lilacs nor beautiful roses made me blush, and to try to escape physically . . . from her bad opinion I advanced toward the exit. But in life it is not always those who bring beautiful roses for whom one is most amiable, for the "marquise," believing that I was bored, turned to me and said:

"You don't want me to open a little cabinet for you?" And as I refused, "No, you don't want to?" she added with a smile, "It was with a good heart, but I know it's not enough not to have to pay to have one's little needs."

Just then a poorly dressed lady, who seemed precisely to have them, entered precipitously. But she did not belong to the Marquise's society, for the latter, with a snob's ferocity, said to her dryly:

"There's nothing free, Madame."²¹

The anecdote I have just quoted, and which is recounted

without commentary in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, is not, I believe, as gratuitous as one might think, for does it not reveal more graphically than any analysis the absurdity of snobbism, and, what is more important, the reality of the moral conversion we have just examined? For to exclude a lady from a public rest-room because she is badly dressed is merely a transposition of the folly which makes the Duchess of Guermantes refuse to receive Gilberte Swann because her late father had contracted an unfortunate marriage. In the same way, Mme. de Montmartre, deciding to give a reception, "already calculated whom she would invite and whom she would leave aside. This selection, dominant preoccupation of people who give parties . . . alters the glance . . . and the handwriting . . . more profoundly than would the suggestion of a hypnotist."²² But the passage demonstrates also the universality of snobbism. "For aristocracy is a relative thing," writes Proust. ". . . There are inexpensive little holes where the son of a furniture dealer is a prince of elegance and reigns over a court like a young Prince of Wales."²³ And indeed the same operation which carried us from the little green pavilion to the salon of the Duchess of Guermantes or the dining room of the Ritz, may carry us also to places less extreme. Proust has merely chosen to study those regions where the affliction is most severe, where the degree of exclusivity has the force of an absolute, where snobbism attains the scope and importance of an epidemic. For all of Proust's creations, with the exception, perhaps, of the narrator's family—to which we may add Albertine, Elstir, and Bergotte—exhibit symptoms of what Proust has somewhere described as a "malady of the soul," but so diverse and so devious that it requires all of his remarkable powers of analysis to achieve a diagnosis.

Perhaps the most radical example of a snob in *Remem-*

brance of Things Past is the Baron de Charlus, whom Proust once compares, not without reason, to Don Quixote. For like the engaging Spaniard, the Baron offers the spectacle of a man born out of his time: He is a portrait by Saint-Simon in a twentieth century frame, and his absurdity arises from his illusion that his person is more or less identical with the history of France before 1789. The Baron's irritation at being addressed as "monsieur" ("I beg your pardon, I am also the Duke of Brabant, Damoiseau of Montargis, Prince of Oleron, of Carency, of Fiareggio, and of Dunes"²⁴) is as anachronous as Don Quixote's armor, but whereas the latter is spared the humility of total folly by his recurrent and dolorous collisions with reality, the Baron's life is a slow charge toward a windmill he will never reach, and the Duchess of Guermantes is closer to the truth than she thinks when she banters, "Admit that at times . . . Mémé . . . is a little mad." For the rampant arrogance which Charlus exhibits throughout most of the book, and the hideous sadism he practices in his last years, are at bottom one and the same thing; and here Proust seems to be telling us that snobbism is often an attenuated form of violence.

Less alarming is the snobbism of Mme. Gallardon, a cousin of the Guermantes, who derives her sole reason for existence from that relationship, not without some misgivings, "the most brilliant among them leaving her a little aside, perhaps because she was boring, or because she was malicious, or perhaps for no reason." In Mme. de Cambremer snobbism is clearly a kind of hysteria: "To be received in the home of those two ladies was nevertheless the goal she had pursued for ten years with an untiring patience. She had calculated that she would no doubt succeed in five more years. But afflicted with a fatal illness . . . she feared

that she might not live that long." These are the classic symptoms of snobbism, whose presence is revealed, most often unconsciously, in the gesture, the glance, the intonation: "M. de Stermaria had the glacial, hurried, distant, rude, punctilious, and ill-intentioned manner that one has in the buffet of a railway station in the midst of travelers whom one has never seen, whom one will never see again, and with whom one cannot conceive any other relationship than that of defending against them one's cold chicken in one's corner of the train."²⁵

No doubt, in the climate of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where snobbism abounds like a weed, it is easily recognizable. But it is among the bourgeoisie—and particularly that upper tier which already constituted a sort of quasi-aristocratic fringe—that snobbism assumes its most disconcerting form. For here the snob has no valid reason for being snobbish; he can justify himself by no title, by no myth of race or family. Yet he knows that by his opulence, his power, and even his education he deserves to "belong." His snobbism is thus repressed, acts upon his consciousness like a secret vice, and rises to the surface under the disguise of a violent aversion for the nobility and an abiding affection for "the common man." This form of snobbism is a neurosis, which can probably best be analyzed in terms of some social "libido." This is the complex which explains Mme. Verdurin, and the powerful bourgeois of the Hotel Balbec whom Proust pictures sitting around in the lobby and pointing out the Princess of Luxembourg and the Marquise of Villeparisis, their fellow guests, as a pair of ancient trollops. Perhaps the most extreme case of middle-class snobbism, whose absurdity provides a kind of corollary to the Baron's, is that of M. Legrandin, who talks and gestures like a self-conscious caricature of Rousseau, but for whom the Duchess

of Guermantes has all the attributes of a divinity, and her antechamber the most sacred adornments of Olympus. At one point the narrator's father tries to force Legrandin to reveal the identity of a distinguished connection in Balbec, little realizing that a total snob is as jealous of his social conquests as a miser of treasure:

"Ah! Do you know someone at Balbec?" said my father. "It just so happens that my son is going there for the summer with his grandmother and perhaps with my wife."

Legrandin, taken aback by this question just when his eyes were fixed upon my father, could not turn them away, but fixed them second by second with increasing intensity—the while smiling sadly—upon the eyes of his questioner with an air of friendship and candor and of not fearing to look him in the face, which his glance seemed to have traversed as though it had become transparent, and to see far beyond it at that moment a brightly colored cloud which hoisted up a mental alibi and which permitted him to establish that just when he was asked whether he knew anyone at Balbec he was thinking of something else and had not heard the question. Habitually such looks make the questioner say, "What's on your mind?" but my father, curious, irritated and cruel, repeated:

"Do you have any friends up that way, you who know Balbec so well?"

In a last desperate effort, the smiling stare of Legrandin attained its maximum degree of tenderness, of vagueness, of sincerity and of distraction, but, believing no doubt that he was no longer called upon to answer, he said:

"I have friends everywhere where there are groups of wounded but unconquered trees, and who have come closer together to implore in concert with a pathetic obstination an inclement sky which takes no pity upon them."

"That's not what I meant," interrupted my father, as obstinate as the trees and as pitiless as the sky. "I asked that in case something should happen to my mother-in-law and she should have need not to feel that she is completely alone, if you know any people there?"

"There as everywhere, I know everyone and I know no one," answered Legrandin.²⁶

This scene, whose model may perhaps be found in Molière's "The Misanthrope," in which Oronte demands of

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Alceste an honest opinion of his poetic gifts, has nearly the same significance, since Legrandin's snobbism, like Alceste's misanthropy, is what Bergson would call the mechanical reflex which exteriorizes his absurdity. It is snobbism, too, which forces Swann to suppress his admirable talent for criticism, distorting a fine and sensitive intelligence, to imitate the mediocre "wit" of the Guermantes. "How nice," he says to a young lady, "you put on your blue eyes to match your belt."²⁷

* * *

A final remark I should like to make concerning the social satire in *Remembrance of Things Past* is that most of its characters, whom we have already defined as hedonists and snobs, are also liars. One of Proust's earliest critics, Benjamin Cremieux, has remarked that "Proust has spontaneously gathered in his work all the extreme and complicated cases of lying in order to analyze them,"²⁸ and it is surprising that students of Proust have not considered this phase of his psychology. To be sure, the observation that man is basically and chronically insincere is scarcely a new one, particularly in French literature. "Human life," said Pascal, "is but a perpetual illusion The union which exists among men is founded on . . . mutual deception."²⁹ A good part of the philosophy of La Rochefoucauld, that Gallic Schopenhauer, is that civilized man's basic achievement is the substitution of self-advancement for self-preservation as a primal instinct, and that his chief tool to this end is deception: "Sincerity is an opening of the heart. One finds it in very few people, and even then what one sees ordinarily is but a clever dissimulation, to attract the confidence of others."³⁰ And surely Mme. de La Fayette anticipated Proust by three hundred years when, in another social satire, Mme. de Chartres remarks to the future Princess of Cleves: "If you judge according to ap-

pearances in this place, you will often be mistaken; that which appears is almost never the truth."³¹

Of course, it would be easy to discover, behind Pascal's aphorism, a Jansenist's bias, and in La Rochefoucauld the bitterness of thwarted ambition, and in Mme. de La Fayette the unmistakable influence of La Rochefoucauld, but Proust's prejudice is more sweeping, his convictions more general, and his analysis of the phenomenon of human deception more scathing: "The lie is essential to humanity. It plays perhaps as large a role as the pursuit of pleasure, and in any case is controlled by that pursuit. One lies to protect one's pleasure, or one's honor if the divulgence of pleasure is contrary to honor. One lies all one's life, but especially and perhaps only, to those who love us."³² And elsewhere, "The lie is the instrument of conversation the most necessary and the most used."³³

I am tempted at this point to examine more closely Proust's theories of human motivation, and particularly his convictions concerning what we may call the "mobilism" of human personality; but this, I fear, would be exceeding the modest limits of my subject. It suffices, however, to notice that there is in Proust a lack of faith in the essential nobility of humanity which constitutes a curious counterpoint to his predilection for the superfluous nobility of a menagerie of cultivated monsters. But more fundamentally still, Proust's continuing hunger for social activity of one kind or another—evidenced not only by a wide circle of acquaintances, but also by a voluminous and, for many, disappointingly shallow correspondence—was counterbalanced by a terrible sense of isolation, and a fear of self-revelation which surely motivated his implacable gentility, and his rather absurd attitudes of abject humility before obviously inferior persons. There are, socially speaking, two kinds of inverts: those who, like the

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later Charlus, willingly expose themselves to ridicule or castigation, or even, like Proust's contemporary André Gide, frankly defend inversion as an evidence of moral superiority; and those who perpetrate upon their friends and family the imposture of their normality. It is to the second class of inverts, for whom lying becomes as necessary and habitual as clothes, that Proust belonged. This is the pathetic race of men—exiles of Sodom—who, he wrote in a recently published passage from his notebooks (is yet unedited), "are sons without mothers, since they must lie to her all their lives, and even in the hour when they close her eyes."³⁴ Even more revealing, in *Remembrance of Things Past* itself, is the avowal by the narrator that "lying and deceit for me, as for everybody, were governed in such an immediate and contingent manner by self-defense and private self-interest, that my mind, fixed upon a beautiful idea, let my character accomplish in the shadows those urgent and paltry tasks and did not turn away to perceive them."³⁵ The most important clause in this passage is the one which seems most parenthetical: *as for everybody*. It would be absurd, I think, to advance the idea that Proust's generalization is invalidated by the same bias as that which explains the "pathetic fallacy," but surely this is why his most constant persuasions regarding the duality of human character were affective—or, as in the great artist, intuitive—rather than intellectual, and why he feels obliged to elevate mythomania to the dignity of an esthetics: "The lie, the perfect lie, about people we know, about the relations we have had with them, about our motive for a specific action formulated by ourselves in a quite different way, the lie about what we are, about what we love, about what we feel regarding the being who loves us, and who believes he fashioned us in his image because he embraces us all day long, this lie is one of the only things in the world which

can open to us perspectives upon the unfamiliar, upon the unknown, which can awaken in ourselves senses which are asleep, for the contemplation of worlds which we would never have known."³⁶

It is needless to point out the unconscious and terrible irony of this passage, for here the Proustian satire turns, as it were, upon itself; here there is a sort of identity between the creator and his victims, the juncture of an apology and a confession. Much energy has been spent, and many pages written, to discover the "keys" to the characters of *Remembrance of Things Past*, in the same way that historians interpret history from the memoirs of Saint-Simon or Chateaubriand. And if Marcel Proust protested, as he did often, against this manner of regarding his masterpiece, I think it is because he was well aware that the only proper key—the one which explains all the characters—was Marcel Proust. And so, indeed, he wrote to a friend, Robert de Flers: "I put all my mind [into my books], all my heart, all my life."³⁷ *Remembrance of Things Past* is less an autobiographical novel than a novel contaminated by the most subjective of autobiographies. But Proust's realism is persuasive because, like Dante, he borrowed its components from a world which existed to describe a world which did not. "I would have liked," he wrote, "to be a character of those *Thousand and One Nights*, which I used to reread incessantly."³⁸ Nothing is impossible to genius: Proust wrote his own. *Remembrance of Things Past* contains all the elements of the most ravishing of juvenile enchantments: it has its prince and its princess—in fact several—and enough pageantry to fill a book as huge as its Oriental predecessor. It also contains an edifying variety of anthropoids who might, if all their vices were known, pass as dragons. But the dragons are only incarnations of what Proust hated most in himself, and each successive princess is

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fatally reduced "to the commonplace of the most trivial reality."³⁹ Paradoxically, therefore, Proust's delineation of a class and an epoch, which we have examined in the course of this essay, is authentic without being real; and his satire, which he projected on a plane at mid-depth between his judgment and his remorse, was double-edged: it was motivated on the one hand by a refined determination to punish society, and on the other by an ever-growing compulsion to punish himself.

LESTER MANSFIELD

NOTES

The edition of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (mentioned throughout this essay as *Remembrance of Things Past*) referred to is that of Gallimard (Paris, 1947) in three volumes.

1. *Hommage à Marcel Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), p. 295.
2. Marcel Proust, *Chroniques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), p. 22.
3. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 299.
4. *Albertine disparue*, p. 431.
5. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 407.
6. *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 597.
7. *La Prisonnière*, p. 155.
8. *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935).
9. Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées* (Paris, Librairie Ollendorff), III, 73.
10. *Du Côté de chez Swann*, p. 74.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
12. *L'Affaire Dreyfus et les écrivains français*, p. 254.
13. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 167.
14. *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 461.
15. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 106.
16. *Le Temps retrouvé*, p. 670.
17. *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, Préface.
18. Many of these articles form the volume entitled *Chroniques*, *ed. cit.*
19. Robert Dreyfus, *Souvenirs sur Proust* (Grasset, Paris, 1926), p. 38.
20. Albert Feuillerat, *Comment Marcel Proust a composé son roman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 116.
21. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, 214.
22. *La Prisonnière*, p. 181.
23. *Les Jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 553.

24. *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 639.
25. *Les Jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 471.
26. *Du Côté de chez Swann*, p. 97.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
28. Benjamin Cremieux, *XX^e siècle, 1ère série* (Paris: La Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924), p. 50.
29. *Op. cit.*, III, 109.
30. La Rochefoucauld, Maxime LXXVI.
31. Mme. de La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves* (Paris, Droz), p. 39.
32. *Albertine disparue*, p. 408.
33. *La Prisonnière*, p. 118.
34. Quoted by André Maurois, *A la Recherche de Marcel Proust* (Paris, Hachette, 1949), p. 46.
35. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 48.
36. *La Prisonnière*, p. 147.
37. Marcel Proust, *Correspondance Générale* (Paris, Plon, 1933), IV, p. 41.
38. *La Prisonnière*, p. 169.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 119.